MOLEFI KETE ASANTE

MAULANA KARENGA

AN INTELLECTUAL PORTRAIT

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This book is dedicated to members of the Us, who heard these ideas long before any of us recognized the significance of Maulana Karenga's cultural project.

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FOREWORD

Only five intellectual movements among African Americans in the last century have been fully transformative: Marcus Garvey's pan-African movement, Martin Luther King's civil rights movement, Elijah Muhammad's religious nationalism, Maulana Karenga's Kawaida, and Molefi Kete Asante's Afrocentricity. In the sense that these intellectual and activist traditions have been at the forefront of changing the operational, social, religious, legal, or symbolic nature of the African American community, they have been transformative.

These movements have been articulated alongside, almost parallel to, the general revolutions in the history of American social science. The first movement, that is, Garvey's pan-Africanism, operated along the lines of the industrial revolution for the production of commodities, inasmuch as Garvey's principal concern was not "back to Africa" but the industrial and commercial development of African people. King was concerned with the projection of African Americans as "integrated" into the White American society and social structure,

with little or no attention to culture; Muhammad sought to change the rhetoric of integration to what he saw as the inevitable separation of Blacks and Whites brought about by the overwhelming nature of Christian racism. Separation, which already existed in segregated situations, was seen as a necessity for survival. It was left to Kawaida and Afrocentricity, which came along during the time of the mass technological revolution for the production of culture, to appreciate the possibility of the transformation of African Americans in such a way that place, situation, or location could only be minimized so long as the people themselves were located in the center of their own history. These movements understood that the transformation of the mass of the people depended upon the symbolic environment itself. This is the beginning of the meaning of Kawaida, culture, tradition, and reason, for African people. Kawaida preceded Afrocentricity but anticipated it in much the same way as Harold Cruse had anticipated Kawaida, or the necessity for it, with his call for a revolutionary African American ideology.

Maulana Ndabezitha Karenga undertook the task of discovering in the crevices of African history the particular forces that represented strengths. He could do this only by a thorough reflection of the nature of the African American historical situation. What was it that Karenga found in African American history that prompted the Kawaida solution? This monograph, by one of the major contemporary scholars of African history and culture, makes the first serious probe into the concrete intellectual ideas of Maulana Karenga as a contribution to the advancing revolution in the way African people view themselves. Molefi Kete Asante has compressed an enormous amount of information from Karenga's corpus to place him in the proper historical and scholarly context of his times.

When not adequately reinforced by the political and

social instruments that govern interpretation, explanation, and evaluation, the intellectual faces numerous challenges to both historical actions and cultural artifacts that exist as a part of a person's comprehensive work. Asante has grappled with the national and international forces that created the cultural transformative ideas of Maulana Karenga to bring us the first real discussion of his intellectual contribution. One of the main international advances he makes is to cast Karenga's work in a larger than African American context. Asante sees Karenga as using the foundations of the best African traditions, not simply African American, as a way to grasp the entirety of the African's response to five hundred years of European domination.

African Americans have frequently been outside of the main institutions in the United States that convey historical moment, such as the libraries, museums, media corporations, and major educational research centers. These are the instruments that define a people's history for posterity. However, there have always been memory-keepers, the oral traditions, the speeches, the tapes, the videos, the music, and the lay teachers to remind us of our legacies. Thus it is important, as Asante implores the reader, to remember what the cultural situation was immediately before Kawaida came into existence as a new philosophical reality for African people.

Ama Mazama

PREFACE

I am a child of the 1960s in terms of my orientation, convictions, inclinations, and aspirations for humanity. In the most iconic of ages, Maulana Karenga has, against the odds, done what most humans have not done and cannot do. He has carved out of the anonymity in which we are all born and the ambiguity of our complex times a persona that captures the juncture between the end of one age and the beginning of another.

My first memory of Maulana Karenga was his voice, urgent and unique, on audio tapes distributed by friends and colleagues and played on Wollensaks players to knots of students at UCLA. I did not know him personally during the 1960s, but I was more than aware of the power of his rhetoric and the magnetism of his ideas. The role destiny seems to have in our lives is remarkable because several events would later bring about a convergence of our actions and intellectual involvements in the African world. From 1969 to 1973 I was the director of the Center for African American Studies

at the University of California, Los Angeles, having been selected for the post by a coalition of community groups and university administrators. I became the editor of the *Journal of Black Studies* and started publishing scholars in the field with an eye toward creating a discipline out of the aggregation of courses that had emerged across the nation in various departments. Subsequently, in late l973, I moved to the State University of New York at Buffalo as head of the Department of Communication.

Once away from California, with time to assess the impact of the radical emergence of young African American leaders such as Maulana Karenga, Bobby Seale, Kwame Ture, and H. Rap Brown, I also took the occasion to familiarize myself with their writings and speeches. I knew most about the leaders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee because, as a student at UCLA in the late 1960s, I had been president of our UCLA chapter. During the time I was heading the Center for Afro American Studies I was a friend to many members of the organization Us and of the Black Panthers. Indeed, some of the cadres that worked in my office and received funding as researchers were student members of these two groups. Nevertheless, it was only at Buffalo that I came to know Karenga's true essence as an intellectual leader. On more than one occasion I heard him lecture in upstate New York and engaged him in conversation around culture and transformation.

By 1977 Karenga had become an international African leader. The Nigerian government invited him to the FESTAC (Festival of Black and African Arts and Culture) in Lagos, which he attended as the head of the African American colloquium delegation. It was at this colloquium where I saw him give one of the most brilliant lectures I had ever witnessed on the state of African Americans, and I decided I should make a thorough study of the contours of his cultural

work. His impact across the African world was immediate and powerful, causing the numerous delegations from Africa, the Caribbean, and the Americas to admire his ability to articulate problems in political thinking and cultural actions and to propose solutions to African issues. During the colloquium, Karenga was instrumental in creating a radical caucus to present a collective progressive view of projects developed by African Americans, Cubans, Brazilians, Ethiopians, Somalis, Afro-British, and the Blackfellows of Australia. After the conference, Radio Nigeria and Radio Guinea played Karenga's colloquium presentation for nearly a month.

Ten years or so later Karenga and I met at the meeting in Dakar, Senegal, of the International Committee of the Third Festival under the direction of the Senegalese scholar Pathé Diagne. At this conference of nearly fifty international African scholars Karenga and I were among the small African American delegation of five people, including the filmmaker Haile Gerima from Howard University. The conference resolutions reflected the arguments that we both had made for the need to transcend the categories that had been defined by Eurocentric thinkers for Africa. It was a victory of monumental proportions considering the heaviness of Eurocentricity in the minds of many African people. Karenga was elated and so was I; we rejoiced in the fact that we had been able to bring the Cubans, Brazilians, Jamaicans, Guineans, Nigerians, and other African populations to the side of a radical revivification of African thought and to lay the basis for further cooperative work.

Therefore this monograph is a small volume intended to introduce the reader to some of the more important philosophical ideas of Maulana Karenga. This is not a biography; it is an attempt to gain a clearer appreciation and understanding of Karenga's ideas, particularly those that have so changed the Black community over the past forty years. I

have spared neither criticism nor praise, but have avoided a hagiographic look at his work. Nevertheless, I have provided the reader with ample clarifications, documentary references, and possible lines of argument and counterarguments should one seek to know more about the intellectual origins and contours of Karengean thought, i.e., Kawaida philosophy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Maulana Ndabezitha Karenga is an intellectual and political activist who is always at work, writing, speaking, editing, teaching, and consulting; the fact that I have been able to spend time with him on occasion is due to his constant companion and partner in life and all things beautiful, Tiamoyo. I am grateful for her support and vigilance in protecting the legacy of her husband's work. She is a scholar and leader in her own right. I want to acknowledge Maisha Ongoza, the chair of the Philadelphia chapter of Us organization for her witness, strength, and resilience in interpreting Kawaida. I also acknowledge the Brooklyn chair of Us, Dr Segun Shabaka, for his work in making available contextual information. Dr Ama Mazama and Dr Lewis Ricardo Gordon, both of Temple University, have been discussants and critics, supporters and interpreters, along my way. I thank them for their useful work. I owe a special debt to Professor M. K. Asante, Jr, of Morgan State University, whose film *The Black Candle* has pushed me to complete this project ahead of

schedule. He is an incredible son and a brilliant filmmaker. I acknowledge him and his work on the Kwanzaa project. I owe my wife, Ana Yenenga, credit for making my life wonderful, joyous, and free of mundane stresses as I have worked, sometimes all night, on completing this project.

1

KARENGA AND THE DRAWING OF CULTURAL GROUNDS

Maulana Karenga is the preeminent African American cultural theorist and one of the towering figures in the science of social and cultural reconstruction of our era. There are no peers to his influence in shaping a cultural discourse that has become a stable of African American tradition. In fact, no single individual thinker has, without media promotion and American mainstream endorsement, molded intellectual discourse and shaped the African American cultural agenda as has Karenga. His reputation rests on his intellectual range and productivity, his achievements as a scholar-activist, and the urgency of his arguments for human dignity. Although it can be claimed that his preeminent position stems from his charismatic presence and his political organization, this is only a part of the narrative of effectiveness in his work. He is celebrated as an orator, a leader and an activist, to be sure, but it is in the quality of his thought about culture, community, and ethics and the breadth of his knowledge of African history and society that one sees the clarity and immense

range of Karenga's intellectual topography. Like all original thinkers, Karenga has studied a vast number of traditions and is a master of the close reading of texts from various cultures and eras. He has explored the writings and works of Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault as well as contemporary African philosophers such as Kwasi Wiredu, Kwame Gyekye, Lewis Gordon, and Cornel West, but his engagement with culture and community relies more squarely on the historical and ethical experiences of African people. This has given his writings a kind of discursive power that is rare among modern scholars. He is as comfortable discussing Khunanup, Orunmila, and Amenomope as he is Aristotle or Confucius, although he rarely strays from his principal subject, the recovery and reconstruction of African culture – continental and diasporan (Karenga, 2006a, 2003, 1999). Engaging the contemporary political and public policy debates in the United States, the Darfur crisis in Sudan, or global justice, Karenga shows an easy grace in moving from one subject to the next with insight and wisdom (Karenga, 2008a).[1] Thus, while he is able to discuss numerous subjects, he is best when he uses those themes to highlight his own important work in the field of Africology. If there is one characteristic of his writing and speaking that marks him as unique among his peers, it is his original capacity to grasp the core of any argument and to present that argument succinctly and in such a way that his eventual dissecting of it seems effortless. As I hope to demonstrate, this ability is characteristically Karenga and is grounded in his hermeneutic style of argument, which he defines as "a language and logic of liberation" (ibid., p. 8). Taking Malcolm X's (1968:133) appeal for a distinction between "the logic of the oppressed" and the "logic of the oppressor" as a point of departure, Karenga sees Malcolm's call for a "liberational logic" as also a call for a "liberational language" (2008a, p. 8). Thus he writes

that "thinking freely requires a language of freedom. The catechism of impossibilities of the established order can only be broken if we have a liberational language which opposes and overcomes it. Likewise, only with the engagement of a liberational language and logic can we break through the conceptual imprisonment that an inadequate or constraining language imposes on us" (ibid.). Given this reasoning, Kawaida and Karenga place great emphasis on language, logic, and definitions.

In researching the intellectual ideas and philosophy of Maulana Karenga, one immediately finds a lack of any full-length scholarly and balanced treatment by any major scholar of his thought and achievements. The one book that seeks to deal with his organization Us is rather polemical and antagonistic and has little interrogation of Karenga's intellectual ideas (Brown, 2003). My reading of Brown's treatment of Kawaida is that the author's engagement with the revolutionary and cultural reconstructive nature of the project was cursory and superficial, thus lacking what can be called an adequate intellectual and historical contextualization. Although Karenga has written no critique of the book, in an interview he explained to me that he thought it was an "intellectually deficient and distorted" work on him, his philosophy, and his organization. I pointed to the fact that the author had thanked him in the acknowledgement section, to which he responded that "I should not have been dishonestly thanked in the acknowledgement for the purpose of any specious claims to the contrary" (Karenga, 2007c). I believe that what Karenga reacted to in Brown's work was the elementary nature of his use of an exhausted template often applied to African American intellectuals. One is often trapped, so to speak, as Brown was in presenting arguments that are far more complex and nuanced than the tired frameworks would allow. I hold that the book was limited in

several respects: (1) it failed to critically assess the intellectual sources of Kawaida in African philosophy; (2) it became lost in the thickets of trying to discover an Asian component to Kawaida; and (3) it trailed off into the land of dissidents whose negative voices added to a prior determined result. When I questioned Karenga about it, he summed up his critique by stating that Brown's book was an

> unbalanced, biased and indictment-focused presentation of the evidence in the historical record and in the state's trumped-up charge against me, it serves as a companion piece to the Cointelpro documents. For not only does the book not acknowledge my continuing affirmation of my innocence from the beginning, regardless of the author's opinion, it also follows the stated policy of Cointelpro of presenting only that which indicts and discredits. (Ibid.)

Although I found Karenga's response interestingly restrained, it was nevertheless a devastating critique to Brown's work.

Over a considerable swath of contemporary African American thinking the prolific Karenga has been criticized and honored for his provocative cultural theories and proactive constructivist philosophy of Kawaida. The fact that few have taken his work as texts for critical review, preferring, it seems, to concentrate on his political or organizational activities, has a lot to do with the complexity of the topography of cultural science in the reality of African American practice. Blacks in the United States are not in a mere theoretical position, but in an existential one that might be examined critically with some attention to the texts written about the situation.

It is not that Karenga is not recognized by other major scholars as a uniquely capable and productive activist scholar. Cornel West, for example, describes him as "the most provocative and persistent proponent of a class nationalist

position" (West, 1999, p. 216). He recognizes Karenga's creative intellect and how he "infuses a socialist analytic component within his cultural nationalism." And he states that "His *Essays on Struggle* (1978) and *Kawaida Theory* (1980) stand shoulders above much of the theoretical reflection on African Americans' oppression proposed by the Black Marxist Left" (West, 1999, p. 216; Karenga, 1978a, 1984). Manning Marable writes that Karenga has been "central to the development of the discipline of Africana Studies" and asserts that "unquestionably two intellectuals . . . have been most pivotal as interpreters and political forces in the development of Black Studies – Maulana Karenga and Molefi Asante" (Marable, 2000, p. 15). In this regard, he has earned high recognition within the field, receiving the highest awards from the National Council for Black Studies, including awards for leadership, publications, and developing the discipline. Finally, it is well known that Karenga's Kawaida philosophy influenced the work of major intellectual figures such as Amiri Baraka, Haki Madhubuti, Kalamu ya Salaam, Larry Neal, and, perhaps less known, Gwendolyn Brooks and August Wilson (Brooks and Alexander, 2005, p. 97; Bryer and Hartig, 2006, pp. 57, 73–4, 97–8).

Given Karenga's body of intellectual work, political recognition, and seminal cultural influence, in approaching my study I was interested in a genuine critical examination of his philosophy. My intention is to transcend description and narrative, except where it is obviously needed, in order to present a critical exposition of the theoretical, philosophical, and ethical ideas of the dominant cultural thinker in the African American community for more than forty years. I have steered away from any hagiographical leanings without abandoning a fundamental belief in Karenga's reconstruction project for human transformation. While it is difficult to place a specific tag on the work of Maulana Karenga,

one can discover in his discourse enough information to construct a framework for critical engagement. He appears always to be seeking to find the most effective way for African Americans and Africans to be culturally whole, sound, sane. I recognize in Karenga the profundity and the passion that have characterized the best thinkers and intellectuals of Africa. One sees this depth and focused concern in Frantz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral, W. E. B. DuBois, Stuart Hall, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Anna Julia Cooper. Karenga's intent is to understand the *situation*, that is, the social, psychological, and moral *position*, hence *location*, of Africans and attempt to change the strategies for transforming our conditions. In fact, my plan is to discuss Karenga's emphasis on transformation as a part of his ethical corpus as it ultimately appears in his *Maat, the Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt*.

Undoubtedly Karenga would be considered one of the principal thinkers in America if it were not for the prejudice that has limited the acceptance of intellectual work of scholars seeking to overcome the impact of race in America. I am not familiar with any thinker, for example, who has had a singular influence on the contemporary culture of America or Americans in general as Karenga has had on African American intellectual culture. Indeed, through the popular media, Karenga's thoughts have infiltrated the educational and commercial sectors of society. There are parades held in his honor, cities that have ceremoniously given him their keys, children who are named after one of the Nguzo Saba (Seven Principles) he created, businesses that offer goods using the names that he has developed, schools that call themselves by titles and names that he has promoted, a national stamp created by the government to honor the holiday of Kwanzaa that he created, images of his thinking in the rap music of the day, and clothing that bears the names and concepts of his thinking.

Where Maulana Karenga differs from other cultural theorists who may possess some of the same powers is his ability for "conceptual generation" and his use of categorization as a form of simplifying complex thought. In discovering how to communicate with the masses of African Americans, Karenga studied the methods employed by the best thinkers and orators. Using his considerable gifts of language he can elucidate and expound on abstract philosophical issues to groups of scholars or ordinary individuals with an elegance of concepts and classification that makes rational sense to both audiences. In all cases, however, he is advancing his principal arguments against all forms of oppression and for collective transformation.[2]

If there is a *djed*, column of stability, with which Karenga supports his views, it is the ethical ground of community. Nothing escapes his insistence on the ethics of the social and political situation. This is a troublesome idea to hegemonic power because it means that he provokes the content, aggravates the status quo, and challenges those who appear to be culturally dead. Karenga has sought more than confrontation with power but has propounded the idea of a reconstructive culture of African people.

One of the central ideals in Kawaida is the indispensability of community, not only as a base of cultural construction, but also as a source of resistance. Therefore, it is necessary, as Karenga declares in his earlier writings, for the African American people, a national community, "to come into political existence" (Karenga, 1978a, p. 30). He understands that

> We are Afroamericans and it is useless to argue or deny the dual historical character of our identity. We grew out of two soils and two societies and must in the end extend beyond both sources and ally ourselves with all the world's progressive people if we are to make the kind of profound